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Improved Instruction Methods Boost Employee Performance

By Martin Kriesberg

Emphasis on employee participation pays off when improvements or changes in grocery handling methods are introduced in retail food stores. Better performance on the part of grocery clerks shows up in a higher ratio of grocery sales to clerk hours, improved utilization of work time, and wider acceptance of the more efficient handling practices.

These findings, made in a recent supermarket study by research personnel of the U. S. Department of Agriculture, were part of a project to determine methods of employee instruction which would obtain better acceptance of improved grocery handling practices. Three methods of introducing the improved handling practices were tested in a controlled experiment among 15 supermarkets of a moderate-sized midwestern chain.

Highlights of the three instruction methods tested are: Method "A"--store managers were mailed memoranda and published material on grocery handling to discuss and distribute to their grocery clerks. Method "B"--store managers were called to a special meeting on grocery handling by their supervisor; they were shown a motion picture on the subject and received copies of the memoranda and published material to discuss and distribute to their clerks. Method "C"--store managers and their supervisor were called to a special meeting on grocery handling, were shown the motion picture, and received the published material on the subject. Grocery handling practices were discussed with the clerks in the stores and at a conference in the company's office. The clerks were shown the motion picture and received copies of the memoranda (see sketch, next page). Preliminary findings on results achieved by each method of instruction follow:

Savings In Number of Clerk Hours

Savings made possible with instruction which emphasized clerk participation in the program of work improvement was 515 grocery clerk hours per week for one group of 5 stores (a saving of over 15 percent). Instruction in which the supervisor met with store managers, but left clerk training to the store managers, was followed by savings of 280 hours per week for a second group of 5 stores (a 10 percent saving). The instruction method which relied on memoranda and printed materials being sent to store managers was accompanied by savings of about 130 hours per week for a third group of 5 stores (a 5 percent saving).

The ratio of grocery sales to grocery clerk hours was improved with all methods of instruction. In stores where clerk participation was em-

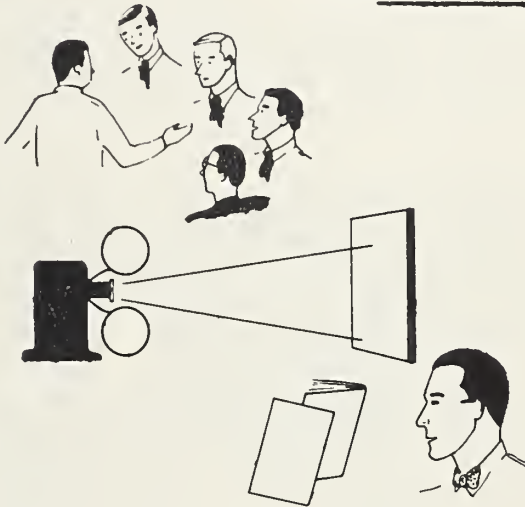
Methods of Instruction Tested

INSTRUCTION METHOD "A"

PRINTED MATERIAL TO MANAGERS
(8 CLERKS)*



INSTRUCTION METHOD "B"



SUPERVISOR MEETING WITH MANAGERS

+

MOTION PICTURE FOR MANAGERS

+

PRINTED MATERIAL TO MANAGERS
(8 CLERKS)*

INSTRUCTION METHOD "C"

CLERK DISCUSSIONS ON IMPROVED WORK METHODS

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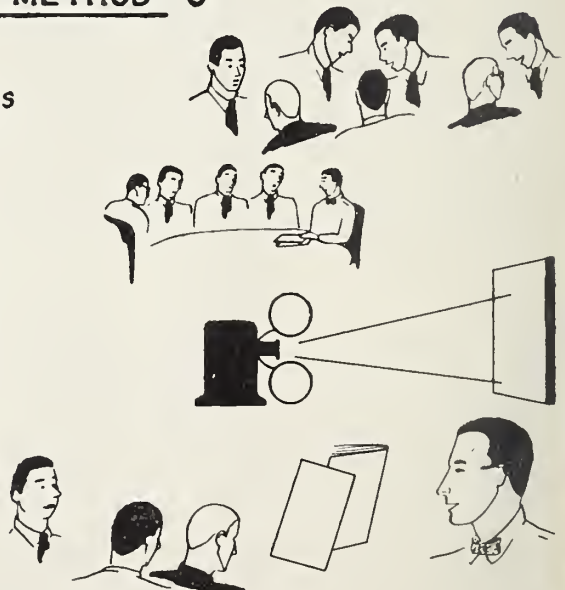
TRAINER MEETINGS WITH MANAGERS & CLERKS

+

MOTION PICTURE FOR MANAGERS & CLERKS

+

PRINTED MATERIAL TO MANAGERS & CLERKS



* MANAGERS INSTRUCTED TO GIVE MATERIAL TO THEIR CLERKS

phasized (instruction method "C") the ratio rose from \$30.59 before instruction to \$35.14 afterward, a gain of \$4.55 per grocery clerk hour. In stores where managers met with their supervisor (instruction method "B") the gain was \$3.29 per grocery clerk hour, going from \$32.42 before instruction to \$35.71 afterward. Instruction method "A" (reliance on printed material) saw a gain of \$1.93 in grocery sales per grocery clerk hour, from \$31.22 to \$33.15 after instruction.

More Time Available for Other Store Work

Utilization of working time by grocery clerks also was improved by more effective methods of instruction. There was a reduction in nonproductive time and an increased proportion of time spent on other store work, such as leveling displays, putting up and taking down special displays and realigning and cleaning up shelf displays. In the period before instruction the proportion of time in "other store work" for both day and night clerks in the stores studied averaged 6.6 percent of the work day. After instruction among clerks participating in the program of work improvement (instruction method "C") average time of day and night clerks available for "other work" rose to 14.2 percent of the work day; among clerks under instruction method "B" it was 8.8 percent; and among clerks under instruction method "A," 7.4 percent of the work day was available for additional work.

Better Display Appearance

Better utilization of working time, particularly among clerks under instruction method "C," was reflected in improved appearance of display shelves. Appearance of display shelves was rated "excellent," "fair," and "poor" on periodic visits to the stores before and after instruction. Ratings of "excellent" for stores where instruction method "C" was used rose from 58 to 85 percent; for stores where instruction method "B" was tested ratings of "excellent" rose from 42 to 54 percent; the proportion of "excellent" ratings remained substantially the same after instruction as before for stores where method "A" had been used.

More Willing Acceptance of New Methods

Acceptance of the improved grocery handling practices, recommended as part of the study, was increased by more effective methods of instruction. An average of the performance of 4 basic grocery handling operations gave the following results: Among full-time day and night clerks participating in the program to improve work methods (instruction method "C") there was an average increase of 26.8 percent in number of times recommended practices were followed; among clerks whose managers met with their supervisor (instruction method "B") correct performances were followed 8.5 percent more frequently; and among clerks whose managers received only written material (instruction method "A") performances as recommended averaged 13.1 percent higher. (There was some transference of information among night crews of "A" stores and "C" stores which probably accounts for the apparently better results of clerks under instruction method "A" compared to those under instruction method "B.")

The study showed that while any one of the instruction methods commonly used in supermarket organizations and tested in the experiment helped improve grocery clerk performance, there was considerable difference in their effectiveness. Instruction which emphasized clerk participation in a program to improve work practices was much more effective than either of the other instruction methods tested. Performance of grocery clerks is little improved by informing store managers about better work methods; the clerks themselves need to be adequately instructed and motivated.

The overhead costs of a work improvement program, in developing better work practices and necessary training materials, are about the same for any method of instruction. Thus, the principal difference between the methods tested was the additional cost of getting grocery clerks to participate in the program under instruction method "C." In the study this was accomplished by periodic visits to the stores to discuss grocery handling practices with individual clerks and a conference on the subject with them in the company's offices.

The cost of conducting a program to improve work practices along the lines of instruction method "C" is estimated at \$6 per clerk more than by instruction method "B," and somewhat over that as compared to instruction method "A." Results of the study indicate that the most effective method of instruction more than pays for itself in reduced operating costs.

Findings Applicable to All Food Stores

Although the study was conducted in one midwest supermarket organization, of moderate size, the findings are applicable for large or small organizations. Employee participation, for example, can be developed around all store personnel, departmental personnel in a group of stores, or personnel in one region of a supermarket chain.

While results of the study indicated the importance of securing active employee participation, it showed that an effective program or work improvement should also include: (1) Evidence of top management interest in improved work methods; (2) dramatization of the program to command the interest and enthusiasm of the clerks; and (3) continuity and follow-up.

Even though the findings in this study are related directly to supermarket operations, they also should hold true in other branches of the food distribution industry where operating efficiencies, which depend upon employee performance, are sought.

The study was conducted by the Marketing Research Division, of the Agricultural Marketing Service, under the Agricultural Marketing Act of 1946. It is the second in a series of studies on improving the productivity of retail food store employees through better techniques of personnel management. Labor is a principal item in operating costs of retail food stores, and high productivity depends on adequately trained and motivated clerks as well as on good equipment and sound operating methods. The study is part of a broad program of research on methods of increasing the efficiency of retailing operations in order to help hold down the costs of distributing food through this stage of the marketing system.

